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From “closed worlds” to “open doors”: (now) accessing Deobandi Darul Uloom in Britain

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Abstract

In 2005, I documented my unsuccessful attempts to conduct qualitative research in a particular group of British Islamic seminaries responsible for training future imams and scholars (*‘ulama*). These seminaries or “*darul uloom*” (in Arabic, “house of knowledge”, often abbreviated “DU”) re ect the “Deobandi” tradition due to their origins in the town of Deoband, India, in the nineteenth century. My article, published in the journal *Fieldwork in Religion*, considered the circumstantial, contextual, and historical factors that might explain why access was apparently impossible for social science researchers, at the time. In this article, twelve years on, I explore why research access is now more possible in at least some Deobandi institutions. These include developmental changes within and outside these seminaries, and aspects of personal and professional biography. My article considers the processual nature of research access, and the need for a felicitous convergence of circumstantial and biographical conditions.

Keywords: access; *darul uloom*; research; methodology; Muslims; Britain; seminary; re exivity.

* This article has beneÎted from feedback from a number of critical friends, and I am grateful for their considered reÏections and comments. Errors of fact or interpretation remain mine alone.

“Closed Worlds”

Researchers rarely write about projects or studies that didn’t happen, at all. The unsuccessful grant application, diϔculties of gaining ethical approval, or the complete lack of access to a Îeldwork site are not often subjects for scholarly writing and reÏection (Schwartzman 1993). However, my article in 2005, “Closed Worlds”, was precisely concerned with lack of any meaningful access to Deobandi darul uloom, and in particular for a male, Muslim graduate researcher who would have conducted the Îeldwork as part of my project. I felt that our diϔculties were revealing of important data about the situation of these institutions in Britain at the time, and that there was something to be learnt through the various ways in which our endeavours were thwarted. I explored the factors that might explain our frustrated eęorts, which focused upon four main considerations. While being individually signiÎcant, they probably converged in an untimely and problematic way in relation to the situation of British Muslim communities, at the time. I summarize these factors below, brieÏy.

Firstly, the origin of these religious institutions in nineteenth-century colonial India and their resistance to “the British” meant that their orientation has generally been characterized as oppositional and resistant to external interference (Geaves 2015; Lewis 2002; Metcalf 1982). This stance was transferred into the British context with the migration of South Asian Muslims to the UK in the decades after the Second World War, and there was little attempt to engage with wider civil society, not least because of the assumption that settlement in Britain was only going to be temporary (Anwar 1979). There was neither the tradition, the expertise, the resources, nor the perceived need to engage (Joly 1988). The second consideration involves the nature, history, and purpose of these institutions within the Islamic tradition. Their primary objective has been the cultivation of pious and religiously-knowledgeable individuals who embody and preserve religious texts and dispositions (Lindholm 2002; Robinson 1982). The preservation of knowledge and its successful transmission from one generation to another produces an orientation that focuses upon internal teacher-student relationships, rather than more outward-facing engagement. The third factor that probably inÏuenced our lack of access revolved around the socio-political climate at the time of the intended research. It was just a few years after 9/11, and there was new and growing suspicion in relation to the potential for terror attacks in the UK. Islamic institutions were under scrutiny in an entirely new way, and subject to increasingly intrusive investigation by the media, counter-terrorism oęcials, and government inspectors (Versi 2003). The last thing that staę in the darul uloom wanted was further “research”. The lack of access was perhaps related to a fourth consideration, namely, the anathema of social scientiÎc enquiry within

these institutions (Hornsby-Smith 1993). While valuing knowledge, it seemed that this did not extend to appreciation of social scientiÎc knowledge, certainly in comparison to the mastery of divinely-revealed religious texts and classical commentaries. “What any group counts as ‘knowledge’ is … a social product” (Spickard 2002: 247), and my work clearly “didn’t count”.

My article in 2005 documented the lack of access, and the often unspoken ways in which we were rebuŋed. We encountered the position, “it’s not up to me”, which pushed the refusal onto nameless others, and the “delayed gratiÎcation” strategy which suggested that “it’s not the right time … come back another time” (Izraeli and Jick 1986: 178). We met with silence, or invitations to submit research questions in writing (only). One way or another, the answer to our request for access was an unspoken but clearly indicative “no”, despite the considerable persuasive eŋorts of myself and people who could act as gatekeepers over a period of many months. My article considered the strategies used by individuals and institutions to thwart these eŋorts, and I reËected upon what could be understood about darul uloom as a consequence of their refusal to enable our work.

In my eŋorts to achieve research access I regarded myself as being “in the Îeld” to some extent, even if not where I had hoped to be. As Shawn Landres suggests: “the ethnographer is ‘the Îeld’ … ethnographers do not just represent and deÎne ‘the Îeld’; they become it” (Landres 2002: 105; original emphasis). Furthermore, an uncritical assumption that my position was one of “outsider” would have been a tacit acceptance of “the nationalist and anthropological premise of bounded, distinctive, naturally localized cultures” (Handler 1993: 72). On the basis of many years of Îeldwork and relationship-building (and friendships) in many British Muslim communities, I could not regard myself as being “an outsider” on either personal or intellectual grounds.

My article was published as the lead piece in the Îrst volume of a new specialist academic journal for which I had a clear audience in mind as I was writing. I was therefore surprised and unprepared for the degree to which it began to circulate in Deobandi circles, and became the subject of negative reactions (so I was told). I had paid insuŋicient attention to the politics of audience reception (Brettell 1993a). The ease with which PDF documents can be appended to emails, or uploaded to discussion forums, means that writing intended primarily for an academic audience can be distributed well beyond typical journal-reading circles. Not surprisingly, the article acquired some notoriety (and me with it). The article had been written and situated in relation to an existing body of academic knowledge and writing about qualitative methods and theory, and in this way, the intellectual grounding of the article will have been familiar to the audience I was primarily addressing (Brettell 1993b: 102). But few readers in the darul uloom

world will have been acquainted with this corpus of literature, and herein, some of the misunderstanding and negativity perhaps arose.

While conducting Ìeldwork for a diµerent and subsequent research project, I was frustrated to hear that critical responses were not necessarily informed by those who had actually read the article. This mirrors the experience of Dona Davis following her anthropological research in Newfoundland (Davis 1983). Many of the women involved in her study voiced disapproval of her interpretations and felt betrayed by her published monograph. Davis was able to accept valid criticisms of her work, but "what was harder to cope with were the mistaken rumours about her book that circulated throughout the community to the point where people who had not even read the book were voicing opinions about it" (Brettell 1993a: 4, citing Davis 1983). A similar point is echoed by Sheehan: "the mythic element of stories about exploitative outsiders can easily overtake the reality of the actual research as well as informed analyses of it. It certainly discourages open-minded interest in reading the actual text" (Sheehan 1993: 78).

More positively, a small number of graduates from Deobandi darul uloom who had read my article made contact, and considered my reÏections on lack of access as accurate evaluations. They supplemented my explanations with ideas of their own that were far more mundane compared to my speculative rationalizations about the relative value of diµerent kinds of knowledge. For example, I was informed that these institutions had historically not always been able to maintain generally accepted standards of hygiene and cleanliness, and that there may have been a sense of shame at allowing strangers to view premises that were not well-maintained.[1]

What was instructive for me to reÏect upon was the fact that as a consequence of the rumours and gossip about my article, I was being subjected to a form of "talk", designed to exert social control (especially in relation to women) that characterizes some South Asian communities (Shaw 2000: 172). Claire Alexander noted the ubiquitous nature of "gossip" in her work with British Bangladeshis (Alexander 2000), while Bolognani makes a similar observation in relation to Pakistanis in Bradford (Bolognani 2009). She reÏects that there "is a tradition still very much alive of passing knowledge on in an informal way through gossip and narration of events that have been heard [at] three, four or Ìve removes" (Bolognani 2009: 2). Some of the negative gossip about my article will have conÎrmed a sense of "moral panic" about the inevitable threat of Western institutions, in this case academia.

1. Notes from personal telephone conversation, 6 June 2009.

Disapproving speculation about the article was also a reflection of the relatively limited ways in which resistance to my work could be articulated (Jaffe 1993: 64). In this way, I began to understand that "the reactions of the people studied to the ethnographer's description and interpretation … are an important source of ethnographic data" (Brettell 1993b: 99). The intensity of disapproval for my article seemed to be indicative of an enduring feeling of insecurity and suspicion of "outsiders" within a tight-knit socio-religious community that, at the time, was struggling to establish and articulate a more self-confident place in British society. "There is a powerful relationship between self-esteem and a tendency to defend oneself and protest against criticism" (Greenburg 1993: 114).

Although my intention in writing the "Closed Worlds" article was to document simply what transpired (as I was obliged to do, as a professional obligation to the research funder) and to signal to other researchers some of the difficulties that might attend research in Deobandi institutions in the mid-2000s, the fact that I had written about lack of access was predominantly interpreted within Deobandi circles in a way that assumed negative intent on my part. This was a disconcerting reaction given the degree to which I actually had a sympathetic view of the institutions and individuals with whom I was trying to forge relationships, despite the frustrations associated with non-access. My sympathies rested upon recognition of successful institution-building in a new context (with the challenges that this entails), and the prominence of some high-profile Deobandi graduates who have contributed in positive ways to public understanding of Islam and Muslims in Britain (Birt and Lewis 2011; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013). Taking this position did not mean "abandoning all efforts at analytical neutrality" (Jaffe 1993: 56). But it did imply that my professional work was (and remains) orientated toward support for Muslim communities in Britain, commitment to a worldview concerned with human flourishing, and resistance to dominant cultural narratives that often frame British Muslims in negative terms. In this way, I really didn't want the institutions I was trying to access to confirm the negative "isolationist" stance attributed to them in so many academic, media and think-tank accounts (Bowen 2014).[2] Furthermore, my academic training and personal experiences over many decades had instilled a recognition that the kind of ethnographic research I wanted to carry out is

> a profoundly ethical form of enterprise, based as it is on a commitment to other people's everyday lives … It is a deeply humane undertaking, precisely because it is predicated on the ethnographer's personal commitment, and on the common humanity shared by the researcher and the researched (Atkinson 2015: 5).

2. For a recent example, see Owen Bennett Jones on Radio 4, 12 April 2016: http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b07766zw (accessed 17 October 2017).

Fast forward to 2017, and the situation is rather diꝼerent. As part of a research council grant application, a formal “Memorandum of Understanding” (MOU) has been signed between my university in Cardiꝺ, Wales, and a Deobandi darul uloom in southern England. If the funding bid is successful, a small research team will be able to carry out participant observation within the institution at periodic intervals during the project. We will have scope to interview key teachers, permission to view anonymized documentary records, and we will have access to students in order to carry out focus group discussions. I say “we”, but should clarify that this access is only partial in relation to myself, as a woman, despite the fact I am the principal investigator. There are some institutional activities that will only be accessible to my male co-investigators and researchers. Despite this (and even if the funding application is unsuccessful) the MOU is for me much more than a mutual statement of intent to collaborate in a research partnership. It is a personal treasure that means as much to me as some of my most signiÎcant academic achievements. It is a professional “breakthrough”, but also an aꝼurming recognition of my original, positive intent, which is concerned with being “faithful to the social world under investigation and the people who make it … and the essential complexity of those lives” (Atkinson 2015: 5).

In the remainder of this article, I reÏect upon the trajectory of events since 2005 and the contextual, political and circumstantial factors that have enabled access to a dimension of British Muslim educational life that is a “closed book” to most people, including signiÎcant numbers of British Muslims themselves. I also consider the way that these factors intersect with aspects of my own biography and career development over the last decade. Many social scientiÎc projects reÏect opportunist possibilities arising from the conÏuence of personal and professional conditions (LoÏand and LoÏand 1995). Just as my lack of access twelve years ago probably reÏected an inauspicious merging of circumstances, the Ïip side also appears to be the case, demonstrating the sometimes idiosyncratic nature of ethnography. “What results from any particular ethnographic inquiry represents a coming together of a personality and personal biography in the persona of the ethnographer, interacting in a particular place in a unique way” (Wolcott 1999: 89) (and we might add, at a particular time). Just as there is a recognition that our multiple positionalities within a research Îeld relative to those we are engaged with may make us “insiders” and “outsiders” simultaneously (Abbas 2010), so too research “access” is equally a Ïuid, negotiated, contextually-dependent, and provisional state of aꝼairs that reÏects biography, circumstances, and often a degree of serendipity.

The Emergence of a New Generation of British-born Deobandi Scholars

The individuals who pioneered the establishment of Deobandi darul uloom in Britain in the post-Second World War years—especially from the 1980s onwards—were inheritors of a religious worldview that was to some extent oppositional to and suspicious of "the British". Their religious training in the Indian sub-continent meant that the priority was replication of the kind of institutions they were familiar with "back home", and the preservation and protection of Islam in a society that was regarded as morally inferior and often hostile. However, these institutions have now produced a generation of British-born Islamic scholars and imams. For most of them, English is one of their mother-tongues, and they have inevitably been inЇuenced and socialized by the cultural mores of wider society, to some degree. Recent quantitative research with Muslim adolescent boys across the UK found that for 64 per cent of them, English was the main language spoken at home (Francis and McKenna 2017). Even if their identity as "British" is conÎned only to the holding of a UK passport, research evidence indicates that the vast majority of Muslims in Britain now tend to identify predominantly with their communities in this country, not the places "back home" from which their parents and grandparents migrated (Karlsen and Nazroo 2015) . This in itself signals a diłerent stance in relation to British society, compared to the immediate post-Second World War generations who perpetuated the "myth of return" (Anwar 1979).

The most entrepreneurial, talented, and increasingly inЇuential among this emergent generation of British-born scholars have often developed themselves in varied and important ways after they have left their seminaries. While usually remaining in close touch with the institutions and their peers, they have gone on to higher education, acquired professional qualiÎcations, or secured positions in publicly-funded chaplaincy (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013). These experiences have shaped their worldviews and attitudes in ways that have been personally transformative, as well as inЇuential in relation to their alma mater. For example, Muslim chaplains—many of whom are British-born Deobandi graduates—have had to learn how to work in multi-faith "teams" in public institutions where ideas about equalityanddiversityaredeeplyembedded(andsincetheEqualityAct2010,carry legal requirements). They have had to think contextually about how the Islamic tradition and the requirements of the shari'ah can be accommodated in settings that have other priorities, such as security, health or military ełuciency (HaÎz 2015). The skills and relationships they have developed have equipped them to reЇect upon the broader accommodation of Islam in public life, and the role that Islamic educational institutions might have in training the imams of the future.

As the British-born generation of Deobandi graduates gain professional expertise and continue to engage with diŋerent parts of British society, they have acquired an understanding that even if they continue to hold conservative views in private, it is as well not to broadcast them in public. James Fergusson's recent odyssey around "Muslim Britain" (Fergusson 2017) brought him into dialogue with Sheikh Riyadh ul-Haq, one of the most inÏuential Deobandi scholars in Britain who acquired a reputation for his conservative views. Based on a talk that Riyadh gave at a youth conference in 2002, Birt and Lewis described his "essentialist vision … [providing] little room for Muslims to engage openly with wider society" (Birt and Lewis 2011: 109). Some Îfteen years on, Riyadh told Fergusson: "I've given thousands of hours of lectures in my time, so of course there are some things I regret saying … But is it fair to judge a man by words spoken years ago, in a diŋerent political climate, a diŋerent time?" (Fergusson 2017: 145). In other words, he acknowledged that his opinions had changed as a consequence of experience. The reverse of this situation also pertains. During the Muslim chaplaincy project conducted at CardiŋUniversity between 2008 and 2011, pastoral accounts were sometimes conveyed to us with the caveat, "please don't tell anyone".[3] Some chaplains who had trained in Deobandi seminaries in Britain had performed duties that they regarded as absolutely acceptable from an Islamic perspective—such as facilitating religious worship for members of other faiths—but which their more conservative community members may regard as somehow beyond the pale. They recognized that in some instances, "the community is not ready to hear this just yet". The point to make is that many British-born Deobandi scholars are becoming more contextually-aware and more adept at managing both internal and external public relations, and navigating the diŋucult tension between "tradition" and the impetus for change.

The brotherly bonds of trust that are typical between teachers and students in the (male) darul uloom sector are such that the "founding generation" of elders are increasingly reliant upon British-born graduates in shaping the future direction of these institutions. While relationships between "elders" and their protégé still retain their characteristic hallmarks of South Asian deference and respect, there is nonetheless an awareness of the need to support the younger generation of British-born scholars when it comes to management of external relations, especially in a social media saturated society that younger people usually navigate with conÎdent proÎciency. This delegation to a new generation has been

3. "Leadership and Capacity-building in the British Muslim Community: The Case of Muslim Chaplains", funded via the AHRC/ESRC "Religion and Society" Programme. Project code: AH/F008937/1.

particularly apparent in relation to the pressures and opportunities arising from the educational sphere.

Educational Influences

Many British-born Deobandi scholars have been exposed to the national curriculum and to mainstream education at some time in their lives, as well as completing their "traditional" Islamic studies. They are able to appreciate simultaneously the merit of time-honoured methods of teaching and learning—often centred uponthepracticeofmemorizationandembodimentofreligioustexts(Boyle2004; Gent 2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2016)—alongside an appreciation of the career opportunities that derive from successfully gaining recognized academic and professional qualiÎcations (Geaves 2008; 2015). This recognition has been encouraged within the darul uloom themselves, and there is now active support for those aspiring to undertake study in the further education or higher education sectors (Birt and Lewis 2011). Given the lack of job opportunities for imams or mosque teachers (or indeed other kinds of professional/salaried religious work) many darul uloom graduates need to Înd other kinds of employment, or progress towards higher education when they leave (Birt and Lewis 2011). This has pushed the darul uloom sector towards more outward-facing engagement, attention to issues of graduate employability, and aspirations for academic excellence among their students.

Their moves in this direction are increasingly supported by Muslim parents in Britain who are concerned that their young people should succeed and Ïourish (Birt 2005). During a study of religious nurture of Muslim young people in Cardiļ, we found that ideas about teaching and learning that parents had absorbed from their contact with mainstream community schools were inÏuencing their attitudes towards the religious education of their children in mosques and Islamic centres (ScourÎeld et al. 2013). There was evidence of a shift from what Castells would term "resistance identity"—shaped by perceptions of external hostility and rejection of dominant secular-liberal values—to "project identity" that seeks to redeÎne the social position of Muslims, not through withdrawal to the "trenches", but through proactive engagement with civil society (Castells 1997). Parents wanted their children to learn how to read the Qur'an, but to understand also its meanings and implications for living as "good Muslims" in a twenty-Îrst-century British context (ScourÎeld et al. 2013). This mind-set is likely to be replicated more widely among the parents of those engaged in advanced darul uloom Islamic Studies; they want their young people to be successful and employable. Seen in this light, the moves that the sector has made towards greater engagement with the educational sphere are likely to be welcomed by parents and the

wider stakeholder community who can, by virtue of their funding, patronage and social networks, exert considerable inİuence on the speed and direction of institutional change.

There are other drivers of transformation stemming from the educational sphere that will have impacted upon the new generation of British-born Deobandi scholars to some degree. Those students who have been exposed to the national curriculum within a darul uloom setting, as well as those following more advanced Islamic Studies, will have been given both compulsory and non-compulsory opportunities to engage with, for example, children from other local schools as part of exchange programmes, visits to charities, museums, inter-faith initiatives, community projects, other places of worship, and so on, often as part of the PSHCE curriculum.[4] A "Charity Fun Day" held at Darul Uloom Leicester reported on successful fundraising for two national charities, namely "Age UK" and the "British Heart Foundation", as well as a local children's hospice[5] while students of Darul Uloom Blackburn have worked for many years with the Salvation Army by preparing and oıering food to homeless people.[6] School inspections by the government inspection body OFSTED[7] now include an evaluation of institutional performance in relation to "community cohesion". Irrespective of whether the impetus towards a more outward facing stance is regarded by darul uloom staı as a burden that distracts from their primary raison d'être of cultivating Islamic knowledge and piety, or a welcome opportunity to cultivate "citizenship" in their students, initiatives that bridge the gap between darul uloom and wider society will shape the worldviews of those students who have been exposed to inİuences that broaden their perspectives and experiences.

Another stimulus for engagement with academia is the eıort that has been underway to secure academic recognition for the classical Islamic curriculum taught in the Islamic seminary sector, known as the dars-e-nizami (Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015).[8] Students who complete an advanced

4. PSHCE is acronym for: Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education.

5. See http://www.darululoomleicester.org/2017/09/16/charity-fun-day-2017/ (accessed 6 October 2017).

6. See http://www.jamiah.co.uk/achievements/community-cohesion/ (accessed 6 October 2017).

7. OFSTED is the Oıuce for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, a government institution that "inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages". https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/ofsted (accessed 26 October 2017).

8. Beyond eıorts at accreditation, there are also discernible signs of what might be termed a "hybridization" of the curriculum. Two examples illustrate this: Ebrahim College (https://ebrahimcollege.org.uk/,accessed26October2017)inLondonandJāmiahKhātamun Nabiyeen, commonly known as JKN Institute, established in Bradford in June 1996. Not only

programme of Islamic Studies beyond GCSE or "A" level graduate from the seminary around the age of twenty-two with a "license" (ijaza) to teach others about Islam, but without qualiÎcations that have currency in the world of higher education or wider society. Furthermore, there is a recognition within the Islamic seminary context that the classical syllabus is an "imperfect Ît with the realities of modern British society" (Tim Winter/Abdal Hakim Murad, Cambridge Muslim College, in the Foreword to Scott-Baumann and Cheruvallil-Contractor 2015). Since the mid-2000s there have been eţorts from both within and outside the darul uloom sector to Înd ways of "validating" the dars-e-nizami, so that graduates gain both their "ijaza", but also a BA in Islamic Studies that can be awarded via a British university (Geaves 2015). At my own university in Cardiţ, we have been approached by no less than three Deobandi seminaries in the last ten years, to explore the possibilities for validation of their classical Islamic Studies curriculum. These approaches have been positively welcomed, not least because they signal—at least in some quarters—a recognition of my original positive intent in the early to mid-2000s when "Closed Worlds" was written, and perhaps a sense that by now "all is forgiven". But as Geaves notes, the eţort to bridge the gap between confessional and non-confessional study of Islam is a complex project, though there has been signiÎcant progress in some institutions in recent years. These include the award of 240 "credits" (short of a full BA) from Middlesex University for a programme running at a seminary in the north of England, for example. There are other Islamic colleges in the UK that have gained validation for their BA courses in Islamic Studies, though these depart from the traditional dars-e-nizami curriculum in a number of respects and the institutions themselves are not Deobandi.[9] The signiÎcant point about these developments, however, is the realization within the seminary sector of the value of academic partnership with universities. This has created new sets of relationships "in the Îeld" which provide greater scope for discussion of reciprocal beneÎts (Harrison et al. 2001) via mutual engagement. The outcome of one such approach enabled my Îrst visit to a Deobandi seminary in the UK in 2014; two members of their staţ came to visit us in Cardiţ, and we enjoyed a fruitful day exchanging information and ideas about our respective Îelds of work. Having hosted this meeting in Cardiţ, there

have these institutions transitioned quite considerably to English as a primary medium of instruction and begun to develop a sophisticated online presence, they have diversiÎed their curricula to include modules and subjects usually taught in "Western" secular universities. I am grateful to Dr Riyaz Timol for this observation (26 October 2017).

9. Examples of these include the BA in Islamic Studies awarded by the Open University for students at Cambridge Muslim College, while Newman University in Birmingham has degree-awarding powers for students studying at MarkÎeld Institute of Higher Education Leicester.

was a recognition that progressing the conversation would involve a return visit to their institution, and thus the beginning of "open doors".

Completing this reflection about the educational drivers of change, we might add one more. Compared to the early 2000s, the potential merits of social science research are now likely to have broader appreciation in Muslim organizations. In 2001, a voluntary question was asked about religious identity in the Census for the first time since 1851, and largely due to the lobbying of British Muslims (Field 2014; Sherif 2011). The question was asked again in the 2011 Census, and is likely to remain in 2021 on account of the high response rate, and the utility of the question in relation to the shaping of social policy. The data has been used extensively by British Muslim institutions such as the Muslim Council of Britain (Ali 2015), while the Birmingham-based charity "Islamic Relief" draws upon Census data in order to produce evidence-based campaigns in the UK.[10] It is likely that social science is perhaps not the anathema it once was, and that high quality, peer-reviewed qualitative research undertaken by responsible and well-trained researchers is potentially regarded as a useful resource in the effort to counter negative stereotypes about Muslim communities or organizations in Britain.[11]

Writing, and Being "Written about"

The terrorist attack in London in 2005 was a significant catalyst for increased scrutiny of British Muslim organizations, including the Islamic seminary sector. In a speech to the House of Commons in the autumn of 2007, the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, stated

> Our consultations with Muslim communities emphasise the importance of the training of imams. The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government will be announcing an independent review to examine, with the communities, how to build the capacity of Islamic seminaries, learning from other faith communities as well as from experience overseas.[12]

The result of this announcement was the commissioning of the "Independent Review of Muslim Faith Leader Training", the results of which were published on

10. See video of Zia Salik, Islamic Relief UK, speaking at Cardiff University in February 2015: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBlzOL8JYS0.

11. An example of this might include the doctoral research carried out by Riyaz Timol as part of the Jameel Scholarship Programme at Cardiff University. His work on the Tablighi Jamaat (TJ) in Britain has been met with favourable approval in TJ circles for its balanced insights in relation to generational shifts within the movement. News of his seminar presentation "went viral" after it was uploaded to YouTube, and has now been viewed over 4,000 times. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wBxeD8p0jpE.

12. 14 November 2007, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200708/cmhansrd/cm071114/debtext/71114-0004.htm, accessed 17 October 2017.

6 October 2010 (Mukadam and Scott-Baumann 2010).[13] Given that a new Conservative government was in place by then, the Îndings of the report and the recommendations arising from it did not have the impetus they might have had if the Labour Party had remained in power. However, the work involved in the production of the review enabled considerable access to a wide range of Islamic seminaries and colleges in Britain, including some from the Deobandi tradition. Though the underpinning research was far from the kind of ethnographic work that I have increasingly come to favour, it nevertheless generated an awareness in some corners of the darul uloom sector that dismissal of external scrutiny was unlikely to be a successful or sustainable strategy. Unlike expensive or otherwise inaccessible subscription-based academic publications, the report arising from the Muslim Faith Leader's Review was (and thus far remains) free to download and will have signalled to the darul uloom sector that being "written about" confers little agency in relation to their public representation.

At the time of writing my "Closed Worlds" article the number of accounts of darul uloom life recounted by former students, usually taking the form of reflective memoirs, could be counted on the Îngers of one hand (Kane 1972). Since 2005, several "insider" narratives have been published (Moosa 2015; Nadwi 2007). Although these derive from an Indian context, they nonetheless oler new perspectives on an Islamic seminary tradition that has been transplanted into the UK. More recently, a darul uloom graduate from the UK has written a Master's thesis that includes research with Deobandi seminaries (Mahmood 2012), while a Jameel Scholar at Cardiq University studying on our MA programme has likewise conducted qualitative research within a darul uloom.

These developments signal a new climate of research and writing about darul uloom that dovetails with the emergence of a new critical mass of British-born social scientists whose religious upbringing—as Muslims—is an important dimension of their identity. Elsewhere, I have reflected upon the Îeld of "British Muslim Studies" and the increasing incorporation in professional associations of new graduate scholars, women, committed Muslims, and those from a range of ethnic backgrounds (and often, a combination of these characteristics) (Gilliat-Ray 2015). Some of these promising new academics are cognizant that, as the saying goes, "if you are not at the table, you are on the menu",[14] and that there may be some value to engaging in conversations, collaborations, and independent

13. For the full report, see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/muslim-faith-leaders-training-and-development-now-and-in-the-future (accessed 17 October 2017).

14. See https://www.huqungtonpost.com/bryan-dooley-/observations-from-below-if-youre-not-at-the-table-youre-on-the-menu_b_9159732.html (accessed 26 October 2017).

research of their own from which they can shape outcomes and perceptions. In this way, British Muslim scholars who engage in social scientiÎc research about darul uloom become pro-active agents in shaping representations that have hitherto been produced and directed by others. In many ways, they have "epistemic advantage" (McGuire 2002: 208, citing Narayan 1989), which derives from their position as ethnic/religious minorities that have been subject to marginalization and misrepresentation. They have learnt "their own culture" but have also had to learn the culture of the dominant group—as a survival skill—thus aıording a particular capacity for new interpretative insight. While the fruits of their labours will be as partial and socially-constructed as any other ethnographic account, their contributions are critical for future understanding of an institution that is central to many British Muslim communities. Melissa Wilcox uses the metaphor of parallax in her teaching of Women's Studies, and her metaphorical device can be readily transferred to the Îeld of British Muslim studies:

> I suggest to my students that just as humans need two overlapping Îelds of vision in order for our visual depth perception to function properly, so we need the experiences and theories of a variety of women and men for the sake of our analytical depth perception (Wilcox 2002: 51).

British Muslim social scientists are now "at the table" in a way that reÏects the intellectual, educational, and professional aspirations of a new generation, and they bring vital new perceptions.

Researcher Biography

In the closing paragraphs of my "Closed Worlds" article, I reÏected:

> I need to Înd ways of collecting data about the professional formation of British-trained 'ulama which does not rely on physical "access" to the institutions themselves—at least as a starting point (Gilliat-Ray 2005: 31).

IwaspartiallyabletofulÎlthisintentionbypursuingathree-yearpieceofresearch in the late 2000s that aligned a long-standing track record of research about the incorporation of diıerent faiths into publicly-funded chaplaincy (Beckford and Gilliat 1998; Gilliat-Ray 2001) with an interest in Muslims in Britain that extended back to graduate studies in the early 1990s (Gilliat-Ray 2010b). My research about the career and work of Muslim chaplains in Britain (Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013) brought me into contact with a number of graduates of Deobandi darul uloom. Although interview conversations about their religious training and formation were part of a much broader eıort to map their career-trajectory and professionalization as chaplains, nonetheless, their reÏections about a darul uloom education were an important by-product of the research that enhanced my understanding of the

institutions in which they had been trained. Perhaps more signiÎcantly, the positive relationships I was able to build as a consequence of the project meant that I acquired a new set of relationships and contacts who could vouch for my personal and professional biography, and my academically-orientated intentions. The publications arising from the Muslim chaplaincy project and its recognition by the media demonstrate the potential value of engagement with researchers to the darul uloom sector (Fergusson 2017).[15] Individually, some chaplains were able to enhance their reputations and proÎle as a result of our work, or exercise leverage with their senior managers, while Islamic institutions concerned with the professional training of Muslim chaplains had for the Îrst time an evidence-based text to use with their students (Ali and Gilliat-Ray 2012; Gilliat-Ray 2011; Gilliat-Ray et al. 2013; Gilliat-Ray and Arshad 2015).

Returning to the starting point of this section, it might be helpful for ethnographers who face diþculties in relation to research access to adopt what Wolcott terms a "stepwise" approach, whereby we take an incremental view of our work, our careers, and our access to a research Îeld (Wolcott 1999). In his terms, access is about the trajectory of a research career, and the way in which this intersects with collective activity in a wider Îeld of social relations. "The establishment of social relationships in the Îeld should be recognized for what it is—a process—rather than a single event" (Atkinson 2015: 184). Most qualitative social scientists are playing a long-game, and "few ethnographers make adequate provision for the possibility that their research of a particular topic or setting may continue for years, perhaps extending throughout the duration of a professional lifetime" (Wolcott 1999: 217). Seen in this light, my lack of access in the early 2000s was a passing moment, but one that it was important to document given that it now oþers a benchmark against which changes and positive developments in the Deobandi darul uloom sector can be measured. My decision to suspend eþorts at "access", and to pursue alternative research activities was an unintentional adoption of a "stepwise" approach that has ultimately paid oþ. But the way in which these events have unfolded signal the fact that ethnography carried out closer to home means that we cannot so easily "leave the Îeld" (Hopkins 1993: 125). I have certainly encouraged my graduate students to recognize the long-term implications of their work, and the fact their positionality "in the Îeld" is likely to be in a constant state of Ïux.

In light of the encouragement now given to graduates of Deobandi seminaries to pursue mainstream further and higher education, it was perhaps inevitable

15. See, for example, "Muslim chaplains connect communities to public bodies", BBC, 22 September 2011, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-15008841.

that the most academically talented among them might eventually wish to pursue advanced research degrees at university, thus creating the conditions for collaborative research with Islamic institutions, rather than of them. There is a mutuality to this possibility, arising from introductions to one another's respective communities of academic and religious practice, and the scope for a more polyphonic discourse about Islamic institutions. A dialogical relationship with research participants at key stages of research design, conduct, analysis and especially "writing-up", also has the potential of enabling participant "validation" (or, equally, querying) of the interpretation of data and research findings (Bloor 1999; Wolcott 1999). The prestigious "Jameel Scholarship Programme" at Cardiff University has enabled several scholars associated with the Deobandi "school of thought" to take up the opportunity of enrolling for advanced research degrees, and I have been part of their supervisory team. In methodological terms, the contours of my social relationships with potential gatekeepers in the Deobandi world have changed shape; they are choosing to benefit from the academic opportunities of doctoral study, and taking the initiative themselves to bridge the gap between the higher education and darul uloom sectors. This has created new sets of relationships, premised not upon my wish to secure research access, but upon the aspirations of Muslim scholars keen to gain further qualifications and benefit from the enabling role that I might play in that process. The doctoral supervision framework has created the context for the gradual development of mutual understanding and collegial friendship.

During the relationship-building process and my periodic visits to darul uloom, there have been opportunities to further their work, and to signal that I know something about how to behave appropriately in the context of an all-male, conservative, South Asian Islamic institution. I have necessarily drawn upon a repertoire of experiences, derived from fieldwork in both British and overseas Muslim communities. This has meant attending to "the control of the body and its margins, the tactful management of personal space, [and] the proprieties of spoken interaction" (Atkinson 2015: 88), amongst other things. Quite simply, there is an etiquette and disposition that requires attention to the subtle norms of speech and behaviour that can be powerful indicators of intent and respectfulness (Gilliat-Ray 2010a). Gaining research access might thus be considered "performative", not in the sense of being deceptive, but as an embodied process that requires attentiveness to the norms that enable the mutual accomplishment of successful interpersonal interaction, especially when there are significant differences in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, and so on. In this way, ethnography is not just a "way of seeing" (Wolcott 1999), but is also about a "way of being" that encompasses all the physical and intuitive senses.

Doctoral supervision enables the creation of relationships that are of course structured in accordance with professional academic values and procedures, but they also carry the potential for some degree of informality over time, thereby enabling aspects of our various "selves" to become apparent in ways that might have resonance with the worldviews and priorities of our students. "Being a researcher is only one aspect of the researcher's self in the Îeld, and although one may consider being a researcher one's most salient self, community members may not agree" (Harrison et al. 2001: 329).

During an extended period of sick-leave in 2016, some of my Muslim doctoral students, a number of whom happen to be Deobandi darul uloom graduates, came to visit me at home in keeping with the meritorious practice of visiting the sick within the Islamic tradition. This unusual blurring of my various professional and personal spheres was welcome in many respects but it did imply that me, and my husband and children, would open the door to our private world and thereby reveal aspects of our "selves" that are usually reserved for our family and friends. This exempliÎes the fact that research "close-to-home" "may come to interweave with our everyday lives [and that] families, work, even friends … may occasionally become enmeshed with our Îeld community or its members" (Hopkins 1993: 123). This aļorded my students an opportunity, partially derived from their ethnographic training, to observeandnoteaspectsofmydomesticlifeforindicatorsofvaluesandbehaviours that are often important in South Asian communities. "Respectability" is a good example. Away from the university setting, they were able to ask (very respectfully, I might add) questions about my family and lifestyle that would have been "too personal" and inappropriate within the parameters of doctoral supervisory meetings. My illness seemed to oļer a fortuitous shift in my relationships with them that may (or, equally, may not!) have been instrumental in securing my access to Deobandi darul uloom for future research. The sociologist of religion, Meredith McGuire, experienced a similar situation during her Îeldwork in Ireland when both she and one of her children fell seriously ill with acute hepatitis. The consequence of her vulnerability and temporary dependency on others was the creation of new bonds of reciprocity and obligation with local women "that I could never have created with words alone" (McGuire 2002: 202). In this way, it becomes apparent that "ethnographic research is a social art form and therefore subject to all the complexities and confusions of human relationships in general" (McCarthy Brown 2002: 133).

Conclusion

The positive implications of the generational shift and more outward-facing orientation of the Deobandi darul uloom do not always receive the publicity and recognition they deserve. Philip Lewis's recent publishing of selective extracts from

the writings of individual Islamic scholars who continue to reflect the sometimes isolationist and sectarian worldviews of their predecessors is rather unhelpful when these examples are presented as indicative of opinions among a much wider group of *'ulama* (Lewis 2015a; 2015b). For example, on the basis of extracts from the writing of the Deobandi scholar Mufti Saiful Islam, which are indeed extremely conservative, Lewis states: "I have chosen this scholar because his views are mainstream within the traditional Sunni 'school of thought' to which he belongs" (Lewis 2015a: 5). The fact is that there has been no systematic study of British Islamic scholars to ascertain their attitudes towards issues such as inter-faith engagement, the role of women, or the participation of Muslims in public life.[16] The assumption of widespread hostility towards non-Muslims among Deobandi scholars implied in Lewis's articles is therefore not evidence-based. Although he alludes to the existence of positive examples of engagement among some young British-born Muslim scholars, the implicit message conveyed in his recent writings are that these are exceptional. His article in the *Journal of Anglican Studies* (access to which requires purchase or subscription) is unlikely to cross the radar of many Deobandi scholars. But among those who might read and share it electronically, there is a likelihood of perpetuating suspicion of academics and their writing, just at a time when examples of positive outward-facing engagement warrant encouragement and recognition.

Reviewing some of the likely reasons for my non-access in 2005, one of them was the deeply embedded isolationist stance within the Deobandi tradition, especially in relation to "the British". It is now clear that Deobandi scholars born and educated in the UK are increasingly likely to frame themselves within the category "the British", tempering and steadily transforming historic suspicion and ideas of difference that were transferred from South Asia in the decades after the Second World War. Their relatively recent incorporation into academia, as both producers of new knowledge and as partners in intellectual projects, signals a gradual erosion of historic suspicion of the higher education sector in general, and the arts, humanities and social sciences in particular. Qualitative research is perhaps an "anathema-no-more". We can also point to the implications of a changed socio-political climate. The coercive forces of Preventing Violent Extremism policies, and the requirements to demonstrate recognition of "community cohesion" in public and educational institutions, drive a recognition within many Islamic organizations that in this evolving policy environment, there is a public relations

16. The "Deobandi" label subsumes within itself a heterogeneous range of internally diverse opinions and tendencies (as it does and did in South Asia) and it is therefore fallacious to present it as a monolithic entity. I am grateful to Dr Riyaz Timol for reminding me of this point (26 October 2017).

game to be played. This has dovetailed with an increasing emphasis in academia on "stakeholder engagement", and the pursuit of research that can demonstrate impact and relevance in wider society. Universities are thus bound up with their own public relations enterprises, thereby creating a more hospitable context for mutually beneficial engagement. Meanwhile, the "employability agenda" runs through the machinery of both the higher education and darul uloom sectors. The value of academic degrees is measured in part by the onward professional employment of graduates, while many British Muslim parents are concerned that the next generation have the requisite skills to flourish professionally and economically in a society that many now regard as "home".

The writing of this article, intended to further an understanding of British Muslim community developments, as well as making a contribution to methodological debates about research "access" and fieldwork relations, has been a professional and personal obligation. It is professional, in so far as it documents a changing socio-religious landscape, and the clear evidence of a cautious but nonetheless more outward-facing orientation in at least some Deobandi darul uloom in Britain and their willingness to facilitate independent academic qualitative research. This has significance not only for researchers, but also for Muslim communities which clearly have an interest in the training of future Islamic scholars and educators. I am also persuaded by the insights and understanding that can flow from the act of writing. As Laurel Richardson notes:

> I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as mode of "telling" about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity at the end of a research project. Writing is also a way of "knowing"—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it … writing provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves, and others … (Richardson 2000: 923; original emphasis).

My "Closed Worlds" article left a "loose end", and a sense of unfinished business (Metcalf 2002: 109). It has therefore been significant for me to reflect on and write about the implications and consequences of what was published in 2005, and to consider afresh the ethics of "writing-about" and representing others. It is fortunate that qualitative research practice now stresses the necessity for reflexivity, and attention to the role and responsibilities of researchers in constructing data and framing narratives.

This professional appraisal flows into a more personal obligation, and that is the public acknowledgement of the trust that has been shown towards me in relation to future research possibilities, and an awareness of the responsibilities and accountability that flow from that privilege.

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